



Few Women Among Auto Industry's Top Ranks, But Change Is Coming

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Body

Detroit remains a man's world, with women making up less than 2 percent of top executives in the auto industry, according to the 1988 Who's Who guide to car companies.

But in the ranks beneath the graying corporate upper crust, more and more women are following paths that will lead them to the industry's executive suites and boardrooms, analysts say.

Of the 966 top executives in the auto industry and supplier companies listed in a directory published this week, 16 were women.

The annual Who's Who in the Automobile Industry, included in the Market Data Book published by the trade journal Automotive News, includes top executives and some lower-level, primarily marketing executives.

This year's version, current as of April, shows General Motors Corp. with nine female executives, Ford Motor Co. with two and Chrysler Corp. with none. The five other women on the list worked for companies related to the auto industry.

"Most of the people in that list are relatively senior," said David Cole, director of the University of Michigan's Office for the Study of Automotive Transportation in Ann Arbor.

"In the next five years I would expect to see a significant acceleration in female involvement ... as more women work their way up through the product or manufacturing function and arrive at the executive level," Cole said Friday.

In 1987, the list contained 986 names, including 12 women or about 1.2 percent. Women made up 1.7 percent of the listed executives in 1988.

"That's actually a great stride for us. It's been a long time for us; it's certainly been a man's domain for many years," said Jeanne Beyer, vice president for market research and planning at Global Motors Inc. and one of the women on the 1988 list.

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Cole and Beyer say women are not yet well represented in the upper ranks because it was only recently that they began choosing careers that would involve them in the auto industry.

"It's only in the last 10 or 15 years that we are starting to see significant female involvement in our (engineering) program. Today it is 25 percent," Cole said.

Women now working their way up as engineers, designers, plant managers or financial experts are part of the corporate mainstream that produces top executives from inside the companies, Cole said.

By contrast, most of the women already in the top ranks at GM and Ford came from the outside, Cole said.

Once women are on a career track, it takes 15-20 years to reach the main executive ranks from which top corporate officers are selected, Cole said.

"Now that women have pursued those careers, the recognition and opportunity is coming. But it's no faster for women than it is for men," Beyer agreed.

In 1987, women accounted for 18.9 percent of GM's total work force of 451,571 and 10.8 percent of all corporate officials and managers. At Ford, women made up 15.2 percent of the 180,000-member work force and 5 percent of the managerial and executive ranks.

Chrysler spokeswoman Karen Stewart said Chrysler's 1987 Equal Employment Opportunity figures had not been compiled, but she offered 1986 figures: women comprised 13.6 percent of the 87,987-worker total and 4.2 percent of the managers and executives.

Once enough women are far enough along in the corporate pipeline, Cole said he expects they will begin to be overrepresented in top executive positions.

"They have tremendous ambition but also great interpersonal skills," he said. "It is necessary to have real ability to work with people in a very team-type setting" that is becoming the norm in the auto industry.